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Perspectival Truth in a postmodern novel: A study of Janice Pariat's *The Nine Chambered Hearts*.

Abstract

The insistence on rejecting a meta narrative ushers in the multiple existing truths in a Postmodern novel. It puts perspectival truth or say, a viewpoint based on personal experience on the platter. A Postmodern fiction is about 'writing fiction.' It is self reflexive. The interplay of various narratives in such fiction itself establishes the idea of construction, which a fiction is and not aiming at representing a universal truth. The aim of this paper is to highlight this aspect of Postmodern fiction which disclaims to offer a universal reality or truth and how any reality portrayed is perspectival, which may be considered real but not encompassing, further explaining the need for multiple perspectives. The text chosen for this purpose is Janice Pariat's *The Nine Chambered Hearts*. The text has nine narrators narrating their relationship with the same girl. Though not necessarily unifying or blending, their narrations about the girl cannot be called disturbing but can be seen as contributing in understanding the character. This paper also attempts to examine the style in which this text is written, further discussing its Postmodern elements.

Keywords: Postmodern novel, multiple truths, construction, perspective, fictionality

The represented world in a fiction is always constructed, framed and mediated to us by someone. Postmodern novel doesn't shy away from accepting this and in fact, highlights the condition of fictionality and rejects the responsibility of representing the ultimate reality. This may not sound new in a 21<sup>st</sup> century world as Postmodernism as a theory reminds one of Poststructuralism, Reader Response Theory, Derrida's Deconstruction, etc. as defined by Brian Nicol in his preface to *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Novel*, "Postmodern fiction as a particular 'aesthetic' - a sensibility, a set of principles, or a value system which unites specific currents in the writing of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century." (Nicol, 2009) Postmodern style in a novel is playful and challenging to read, inviting the reader to be more active.

Janice Pariat's *The Nine Chambered Hearts* in short, follows the life of a young woman and her life in relation with different people and in different cities. The cities are nameless, so are the characters and the protagonist but not incomprehensible. This text transcends the idea of a singular opinion or 'truth' and ushers the reader in a world of possibilities of knowing the protagonist by offering alternative narratives. The female protagonist is unnamed so are the narrators who narrate their experiences with her. There are nine narrators in the text, though unnamed, titles are attached to their characters – The Saint, The Butcher, The Caretaker, The Undertaker, The Professor, The Florist, The Crusader, The Lighthouse Keeper and The Sailor. These do not adhere to the line of professions these narrators are in but rather their nature and to an extent, their presence in the protagonist's life. The presence of the author though not prominent is felt at times through such representations of the narrators, addressing them with these titles. Though narrated in first person narrative by these characters, the trace of the writer presents the text as an aesthetic product, highlighting the fictionality of a fiction.

This also proves that though a Postmodern novel echoes the Reader Response Theory, it deviates from it in highlighting the writer's presence in a text and not adhering to 'death' of the author. Whereas the role of the reader is concerned, it too believes in the active role of the reader to question, examine, etc the given text. The reading of the text offers the point of similarities yet the different moods, nature and reciprocation of the protagonist. One can find the protagonist's love for cats, her citrus smell, interest in origami in many parts of the narrations. Addition or contrary to that, it can be argued that she is the same in terms of her likes and interests, yet she is different in terms of nature, reaction and understanding in relation with these narrators. For instance, the Butcher is a musician and in her relationship with him, the protagonist seems more engaging and committed and the environment is passionate yet abusive, "You are lodged in a corner, screaming at me, and I raise my hand." (Pariat, 2017, 23) In case of the Lighthouse Keeper, she seems demanding and impulsive, "You have taken and taken, my blood and soul, and all of me, until there will be nothing left." (Pariat, 2017, 180)

Pariat's text provides nine narrations, perspectives of nine characters on the protagonist to the reader. Though there is an ample amount of information and insights into the protagonist's life, the role of the reader cannot be said to be diminished in the presence of multiple realities. The repeated insistence on calling New Delhi as the "city with no river" without naming the capital, is confusing and definitely, questionable as the river Yamuna flows there. The cities in this text aren't names like the characters aren't, they are simply referred to as "city with a river" or "city without a river." The other elements provide hints for the reader to guess. For instance, the mention of the 'city with a river' abroad with a clock tower view from the window may be London with Thames river and Big Ben.

Another interesting inclusion in the text is the beginning of each chapter which in a way leaves one wondering about the story to come. The beginning line in all the chapters

introduces the narrator and the protagonist and forcing the reader to expect the progression or the end from these lines, as the tone of these lines is almost like a declaration by the narrator. In the first section, *The Saint* begins with, “You are twelve, you loathe me.” (Pariat, 2017, 01) *The Florist* begins with, “How do I tell you this is not love?” (Pariat, 2017, 119) *The Sailor* with, “We’re both aesthetes, You and I.” (Pariat, 2017, 183) and so on. The reading of these lines will without doubt leave a reader expecting of something and, later leading either to fulfilment or breaking the monotony of that expectation but nevertheless keeping the mind of the reader constantly at work.

The protagonist’s voice in the text do not surface much though she is represented as an independent adult, outspoken and taking her own decisions for herself, whether it be marriage to the Lighthouse keeper or a relationship with a much older man, the Caretaker. In one of the section, *The Professor*, she is curt in her reply to the narrator who calls literature as out of date. She is sarcastic in telling the Professor, that, “Literature is not the news.” (Pariat, 2017,88) It can be argued that her reply exemplifies an important feature of Postmodern fiction, which do not claim to reflect life as it is and rather makes a reader conscious of its fictionality instead of upholding a text as the ultimate flag bearer of reality. It is imperative to understand the text’s fictionality, as Nicol writes that it is important to recognize fiction as framing by the author and the things we see in art is possible because of the author’s intention. (Nicol, 2009)

The emphasis of a Postmodern fiction on the understanding of fiction as a construction is to reveal the fictionality of a text, that it is a creation by someone and hence, perspectival. Some instances and description in this text attempts to make a reader realize how even the words and perspectival truth of the different narrators are actually the author’s. There are a similar description by the Saint and the Caretaker of the protagonist, the similarity in description cannot be doubted as it is of the same person but it is interesting to note that

along with the choice of words used for description, their word formation is uncanny. In the first section, she is described as "... gangly and awkward" child by the Saint (Pariat, 2017, 11) And the Caretaker is certain she must have been "... awkward, gangly" as a child. (Pariat, 2017, 46) The presence of the author in the text can hardly be ignored in these instances.

Another important aspect of a Postmodern novel is to convey that the quest for the ultimate reality is quite absurd as what is represented on the pages may not be real but a represented reality already divorced from real life. B.S. Johnson in his introduction to *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Own Memoirs?* shares that realist tradition is dishonest in claiming to represent reality and real people on pages. (Johnson, 1990) Postmodernism can also be understood as creating an awareness of the discourse or ideology underlying any narrative, by offering an alternate narrative and at the same time, acknowledging it for what it is, an ideology or a perspective but not an exact replica of reality. In one of the sections, , the protagonist in Pariat's text is found putting emphasis on multiple perspectives, "... we like imitating the world and seeing how we can do that in different ways. "(Pariat, 2017, 125) In short, it can be said that multiplicity of versions show the never ending capacity of representing the world and not restricting it to a singular viewpoint.

Saussure de Ferdinand, the famous linguist argued that the language and the world are separate and the gap cannot be bridged. Therefore, it can be concluded that the words on the pages may not be equipped to reflect life as it is but can be employed to represent life or a fraction of it. The chosen text clearly focusses on this aspect, there are different perspectives offered by nine narrators on the protagonist, yet it is difficult to grasp her fully because there is an absence of her perspective on her relationship with these nine characters. Though the text presents multiple truths about the protagonist, yet it is not enough in understanding her fully. In addition to that, there also lies the danger of unreliability on the part of the narrators as "... narrative is always the result of selection and interpretation. "(Nicol, 2009, 12) The

understanding of the protagonist rests on the reader, similar to that of a narrator but with more substance or multiple realities provided in the text.

Lyotard in his famous work, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* has articulated how Postmodern culture can be seen as an end of grand narratives or meta narrative whose purpose is to give a totalizing account of values, experiences, knowledge, etc for legitimization. (Lyotard, 2010) The multiple lenses offered in Pariat's text do not foreground or background one another. They exist on their own foundation and at the same time, the perspectival narration or truth regarding the protagonist coming from each narrators reveal the personal nature of each narrative.

For instance, it is evident in the reading of the text that the experiences of the Sailor, who believes in sailing with the flow and does not take much effort in anchoring himself or the situation around him. He entertains the protagonist but with the awareness of his self, which stems from his experience of inability to deal with loss. He lost his wife to an accident in the past and therefore, sails where the waves takes him without hope or purpose. He says, "I'm certain of it – You will leave me behind. " (Pariat, 2017, 200) It can therefore be argued that he has accepted himself to be the one who is left behind and not the one who leaves based on his past experiences, taking whatever comes his way. This not only determines his attitude but his behaviour towards the protagonist and the resulting experience with her along with the formed perspective about her, in turn also determining partly, the protagonist's attitude towards him.

Postmodernism is not free of criticism, one of the critics who strongly spoke against it was Fredric Jameson who called postmodernity 'schizophrenic.' In his 1991 work, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, he argues that Postmodernism's preference for pastiche over parody as an aesthetic technique is inferior as parody has ulterior motive, to satirise which pastiche doesn't offer. (Jameson, 1991) But to argue against this

argument, pastiche does have a purpose, a parody of literary conventions, whether it be challenging the claim of realism or questioning grand narratives as Bran Nicol mentioned that it cannot be taken granted, “that ‘reality’ is something natural, something ‘innocently’ given.”(Nicol, 2009, 13) Therefore, any attempt to reflect reality as it is to be seen with needed reservation as Baudrillard has already warned against the technique of ‘simulation’(the know it all representation by employing and explaining everything) employed in the production of reality in art or any form. (Baudrillard, 2014)



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